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Washington called shots in last hours

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WASHINGTON—Former Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos' last hours in power were finally shaped by decisions made in Washington.

"It was a balancing act," a senior administration official said. "It was a tightrope we had to walk."

The cast of key players walking that tightrope in Washington featured President Reagan, who made the final tough decision to cast Marcos adrift, and Reagan's old political associate, Nevada Sen. Paul Laxalt, who brought Marcos the first ominous hint last fall that the White House was dissatisfied with the way he was running the Philippines.

Also central to the drama were Philip Habib, the veteran troubleshooter who went to the Philippines to look and listen—and heard enough to warn Reagan that Marcos' days might be numbered; U.S. Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, who kept up tireless contacts with the Asian leader until Marcos finally relented, and a host of congressional critics who turned up the heat on Marcos long ago and kept the fire stoked.

Senior Reagan administration officials stress that the events that led to Marcos' fall took place largely in the streets of Manila and the polling places of rural provinces where fraud and murder turned Philippine and American public opinion against the longtime American ally. But the White House and its allies in Congress took credit for steering developments in the right direction.

Hailing a largely peaceful transition of power to new President Corazon Aquino, White House spokesman Larry Speakes said Tuesday that the outcome in the Philippines was Reagan's goal all along.

"The President's approach was one that was established early on," Speakes told reporters. "It was a responsible one. It was carefully orchestrated. It was designed to avoid violence and bloodshed to reach a peaceful solution, to reach a democratic outcome."

From accounts pieced together from the White House, Capitol Hill and other administration sources, the administration's view of Marcos' ability to hold on changed in earnest last week with Habib's mission as Reagan's special envoy.

Sen. Richard Lugar [R., Ind.], chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had paved the way a few days before in his role as head of the observer team that Reagan sent to monitor the Feb. 7 special presidential election. He expressed his concern over fraud by the Marcos forces and questioned the validity of the vote count.

Flying into Manila on the heels of Lugar's departure, Habib was given wide latitude on his mission of bringing back the hard facts to Reagan.

Over 10 days, the veteran diplomat met personally with more than 100 key players in Filipino politics and society. As far as Reagan was concerned, Habib "kept the lid on" in the tense post-election period, when anti-Marcos feelings ran high in the Aquino camp and the first rumblings of a possible military revolt against Marcos were picked up.

By last Thursday, the White House knew from its intelligence reports and Habib's constant communications that Marcos was planning to round up dissident military officers, and that some of those officers were plotting to beat Marcos to the punch by launching a revolt.

Friday night, top White House aides were put on a heightened alert status. By Saturday, when the revolt finally came, the White House was prepared. Within hours, it issued a statement, approved by Reagan, endorsing the rebels' allegations of vote fraud and calling on Marcos to refrain from violence.

On Sunday, though, it appeared Marcos might disregard the appeal and attack rebel forces, then holed up in a suburban military camp and surrounded by thousands of Filipino civilians.

At a hastily called White House meeting of national security aides, Reagan heard Habib and others express doubts that Marcos had much time left. But he also heard their fears that the Philippines could be on the verge of civil war.

Hoping to avert bloodshed, Reagan went further in support of the rebel camp, warning Marcos to not use force and threatening to cut off all U.S. military aid if he did. But he purposely avoided calling for Marcos' resignation, saving that as a last resort.

The President went to bed Sunday night hoping his old friend would pay heed, but White House officials noted that Gen. Fabian Ver, Marcos' loyalist armed forces chief, seemed intent on launching a military strike against the rebels.

When reports came in that Ver had assembled forces to use against the rebels, national security adviser John Poindexter and White House chief of staff Donald Regan put together a statement calling on Marcos to resign, saying that attempts to use force to stay in power would be "futile."

Reagan, awakened at 5 a.m., approved the statement, and Secretary of State George Shultz and Habib later briefed congressional leaders as Washington awaited Marcos' reply.

Behind the scenes, Ambassador Bosworth was in close touch with Marcos, while other embassy staffers were in contact with his family members and other supporters inside Malacanang Palace. The embassy message was one of safe transportation out of the country and asylum in the U.S. if Marcos desired to exit peacefully.

Later Speakes would say this offer of asylum was "instrumental" in persuading Marcos to leave.

On Capitol Hill, meanwhile, Laxalt was sitting through the briefing by Habib and Shultz when he received a note telling him Marcos was on the phone.

Marcos asked Laxalt whether the reports from the media and the U.S. Embassy in Manila that the White House wanted him to step down really reflected Reagan's views.

Marcos also offered to share power with Aquino in a coalition government, and asked whether Washington would support such a move.

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